

A Controversial Musical's Sweet Comeback Song

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New York Times (1923-Current file); Oct 5, 2004; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. E1

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By **LOLA OGUNNAIKE**

The audience was positively giddy at the Friday night opening of the revival of Melvin Van Peebles's 1971 Broadway musical "Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death," but whether he was enjoying himself remained difficult to tell.

Mr. Van Peebles, the maverick filmmaker whose 1971 blockbuster "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song" has been credited with starting the blaxploitation genre, sat in the middle of the sold-out Harlem School of the Arts Theater near 141st Street and St. Nicholas Avenue, staring blankly at the orchestrated chaos erupting before him. He did not cringe during the particularly brutal scenes: a prostitute is raped at gunpoint by a police officer, a heartbroken lover is electrocuted. Nor did he crack a smile during comic moments, as when a chiseled drag

queen looks at a rival and urges her to "leave poly and ester alone."

It wasn't until intermission that Mr. Van Peebles, 72, momentarily sparked to life. He was asked what he made of the production thus far. "I don't know who the writer is," he replied, a light flickering in his heavy brown eyes, "but he is brilliant."

Mr. Van Peebles not only wrote the book, but he also composed the score and lyrics for "Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death," an assortment of vignettes that offers an unflinching look at black street life. The musical, which received seven Tony nominations including for best musical, is being revived for a monthlong run by the Classical Theater of Harlem.

Alfred Preisser, the Classical Theater's co-founder and artistic director, was attracted to the idea of directing Mr. Van Peebles's work because, he said: "I thought it would be a blast. I maybe got in over my head

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and bit off more than I can chew, but it's a great challenge."

It is also a challenge for viewers. With a cast of 18 and a six-piece band (in the original, the seminal R&B group Earth, Wind and Fire provided the music), the show opens with a funky up version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" and ends with a scathing curse in the form of a spoken-word monologue. Blind beggars and winos, crooked cops and desperate strivers weave their way through the audience, chanting their lines loudly over the blaring score.

Most of the reviews for the original production were hostile. Clive Barnes in *The New York Times* registered bewilderment: "I suspect that this is a fair picture of a 1971 New York street scene — not, dear friend, on the street where you live, but I suspect that people do, and rats and things like that."

Mr. Van Peebles said critics at the time were used to being pandered to. "In trying to crossover to the mainstream, some people stopped writing what they witnessed," he said with what seemed like mild annoyance.

"All I did was annotate what I was seeing," he added. "I'm from the South Side of Chicago and just looking out the window I saw 10 people killed before I was 9."

Mr. Van Peebles said he did not set out to push buttons: "I do this like I cook. I put in what I like, and if other people don't like it I have to eat it for the rest of the week. It must be horrible to do things that you don't like hoping to please other people, and they don't like it either and you've got to eat it."

On the way to the after-party at a neighboring community center, an elderly gentleman with thinning hair patted Mr. Van Peebles on the back. "Things haven't changed not one bit," he lamented. "No, they haven't," Mr. Van Peebles replied gravely.

Later, over red wine and cheese, Mr. Van Peebles, who has a way with a well-timed expletive, expounded on this point: "It could have been 15 minutes ago as far as I'm concerned. You go up to the fish market on 147th and you'll see these scenes play out."

More than three decades later the work still resonates, and much of it

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Michael Nagle for The New York Times

Melvin Van Peebles watching "Ain't Supposed to Die" on Friday night.

remains provocative — even by today's standards. A lesbian serenades her incarcerated lover; a pimp beats his "lady" within an inch of her life for the \$5 she's withholding (she ends up coughing up \$10); and a police officer kills an innocent bystander and then is shot dead by a militant sniper. Mr. Van Peebles summed up the 1970's theatergoer's reaction by slapping his hands to his face and widening his eyes, Macaulay Culkin-style.

But during the intermission and at the after-party, Mr. Van Peebles — nattily dressed in polka-dot suspenders and a tweed newsboy cap, and holding his signature unlit cigar — lapped up praise from theatergoers.

Mr. Van Peebles, who has tried everything from writing novels (four in French) to commodities trading, has always been a man who followed his passions. His first Hollywood feature, "Watermelon Man" (1970), about a white suburban man who one morning wakes up black, was a modest hit. He sunk the profits from it (along with a five-figure loan from his friend Bill Cosby) into "Sweet-

back." With that film's staggering success, Mr. Van Peebles said he felt free to pursue even more experimental projects. He decided to turn the three albums he had recorded between 1968 and 1970, "Br'er Soul," "Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death" and "As Serious as a Heart Attack," into the musical "Ain't Supposed to Die."

"Even though there were uprisings in the ghetto going on," he said, "there were very few songs that mirrored this, and so I sort of invented and hobbled together this style, which was a sort of precursor to rap." He bobbed his head and dropped a verse from the musical's powerful final scene. "Put a curse on you/May all your children end up junkies, too," he rhymed.

Other playwrights may be embarrassed by work they staged more than 30 years ago, but Mr. Van Peebles remains proud. "It would be pretentious for me to dis what I did then now," he said. "I did the very best that I could with the knowledge and the feelings I had then."